

# U.S. SENATOR BEN CARDIN

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Dear Friend,

Let's talk about testing.

This week, while in Pennsylvania, the president of the United States said the following:

*"More testing only reveals more infections and therefore increases the numbers. In a way, by doing all this testing we make ourselves look bad."*

He had that half right: more testing does reveal more infections. However, lack of testing does not mean that infections aren't out there. It means we have no clue who is infected and who isn't or where the virus is spreading in the community.

Testing is a diagnostic tool that helps us fight this pandemic, individually and as a society, with our eyes wide open.

Testing is a fundamental component of controlling the spread of COVID-19 enough to reopen our communities safely. We cannot begin to reopen businesses and schools unless we understand the extent to which the virus is still circulating. That requires us to test all infected people and any close contacts they may have.

So far, the United States has been slow to ramp up our testing levels, and our testing capacity is still lower than it needs to be. The World Health Organization (WHO), which provides essential information and technical assistance needed by independent nations to make their own educated decisions, has stated that a positive rate below 10 percent reflects sufficient testing – any higher, and the indication is that the U.S. is missing many active infections and only testing the sickest patients seeking medical care.

Currently in the U.S., roughly 13 percent of COVID-19 tests come back as positive. This past week, the U.S. average over 321,500 tests performed each day. Many public health experts estimate that the U.S. would need to double or triple the number of tests performed each day to identify comprehensively those infected so they can be isolated and no longer spread the virus to others. Of course, any testing effort must be paired with aggressive contact tracing in order to track the scale of infection in the community, isolate the sick, and quarantine those who have been exposed.

By the numbers, [at least 10 countries most impacted by COVID-19 have higher per capita testing rates than the U.S.](#), including Russia, Germany and the United Kingdom. No, we do not lead the world in testing, as the White House has proclaimed. A major reason that we continue to lag behind, despite having the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world, is the absence of a detailed, consistent federal strategy to get states the supplies and guidance they need to conduct testing effectively.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker described the situation:

*"We're competing against each other. We're competing against other countries. You know, it's a wild west, I would say, out there. And indeed, we're overpaying, I would say, for (personal protective equipment), because of that competition ... This should have been a coordinated effort by the federal government."*

Maryland, like many states in the U.S., has struggled to procure all the materials needed to perform diagnostic COVID-19 tests. A lab must have nasal swabs, viral transport media, and chemical assays and reagents in order to run a COVID-19 test properly. Due to an unreliable supply chain, states continue to have difficulty sourcing all of these components in high enough quantities, which severely limits their ability to perform diagnostic tests.

This week, President Trump announced that the federal government would provide states with 12.9 million swabs and almost 10 million tubes of viral transport media to help states test at least 2 percent of their population. That's a first step, but what about the reagents needed to analyze the patients' samples to determine if they are COVID-19 positive? Without them, swabs and viral transport media are of little use. States will be unable to perform substantial testing until they have *all* of the necessary components.

To great fanfare, our state procured 500,000 test components from South Korea, only a small fraction of which have been utilized because the other needed pieces have been more difficult to find.

Only the federal, Executive Branch can solve the underlying problems of coordination in the supply chain.

As the president touts how he is restocking the Strategic National Stockpile for "the next pandemic," his administration is neglecting its responsibility to help our country navigate the current pandemic, with devastating consequences. The absence of federal leadership has stalled the Nation's public health response and that will hinder our economic recovery.

The conflicting messages between federal health experts and the president about when it is safe to reopen local economies only makes it more difficult and more frustrating for the American people.

Our economy is hurting right now – the Labor Department recently announced that the U.S. unemployment rate has surged to a level unseen since the Great Depression. President Trump has pushed for shelter-in-place measures to be lifted as a means of stimulating the economy, but surveys have found that the majority of Americans wouldn't eat in a restaurant, go to the movies, or return to a shopping mall even if they were told they could. That tells us that the economic turmoil we are experiencing is driven primarily by Americans' fear, independent of their states' policies, that going outside will result in illness.

We can only alleviate that fear by giving the public the confidence that we have this pandemic under control; that confidence will be directly tied to testing. That's why the federal government must partner with states to aggressively increase this country's testing capacity.

I will continue to push for a comprehensive, national testing strategy so that we can help Marylanders and all Americans feel safe again, return to work and school again when safe, and protect our country's future.

Your friend,

Ben Cardin

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